

Hepatitis A: General Information

Modes of Transmission

The hepatitis A virus (HAV) is usually spread via the oral-fecal route. People can get hepatitis A through:

Person to person contact

- When an infected person does not wash his or her hands properly after going to the bathroom and touches other objects or food
- When a parent or caregiver does not properly wash his or her hands after changing diapers or cleaning up the stool of an infected person
- When someone has sexual contact with an infected person (not just limited to anal-oral contact)

Contaminated food or water

- Hepatitis A can be spread by eating food or drinking water that is contaminated with the virus
- It is also transmitted by consuming contaminated raw shellfish
- In the United States, chlorination of water kills the hepatitis A virus that enters the water supply

Symptoms

The incubation period for hepatitis A is 15 to 50 days, with an average of 28 days. While children who contract hepatitis A typically have no symptoms, adults can become very ill and display the common hepatitis symptoms:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (a yellowing of the skin or eyes)

Testing

Tests commonly performed to diagnose hepatitis A include:

IgM anti-HAV (IgM hepatitis A antibody): If a patient tests positive, they have acquired the hepatitis A virus, or have been vaccinated within the last six months.

Anti-HAV total (hepatitis A antibody total): Appears as the person convalesces, and gives protection against future infection.

Vaccination and Prophylaxis

Hepatitis A vaccination is recommended for:

- All children at age one year
- Travelers to countries that have high rates of hepatitis A
- Men who have sex with men
- Users of injection and non-injection illegal drugs
- People with chronic (lifelong) liver diseases, such as hepatitis B or hepatitis C
- People who are treated with clotting-factor concentrates
- People who work with hepatitis A-infected animals or in a hepatitis A research laboratory

There are two types of products available for prophylaxis and prevention of hepatitis A infection:

Hepatitis A vaccine provides active immunity against the hepatitis A virus through a series of two injections, with the second given at six to 12 months after the first. The vaccine can provide protection as soon as four weeks after the first injection.

Immune Globulin (IG) provides protection against hepatitis A through the passive transfer of an antibody. IG provides temporary immunity to the virus for two to three months, if administered prior to exposure or within two weeks after exposure.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A, only the management of symptoms. The infection will clear up within a couple of months, and the patient will be immune to the virus.

References:

1. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines 2015*, MMWR 2015;64(3); - Includes a chapter on Hepatitis A
2. Updated Hepatitis A Postexposure Prophylaxis and Travel Vaccination Recommendations (<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5641a3.htm>) MMWR 2007;56(41):1080–4
3. Prevention of Hepatitis A Through Active or Passive Immunization: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) (<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5507a1.htm>) MMWR 2006;55(RR-7)
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website; www.cdc.gov/hepatitis